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Government
Publications

AN ADDRESS BY

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MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD



**BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH
SPRING CONFERENCE**

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It might do no harm to begin with a reminder that government policies apply to an enormous area. Ontario is bigger than Great Britain, France, West Germany and Belgium all rolled into one. We have about 20 million acres of Class 1, 2, 3 and 4 agricultural land as classified by the Canada Land Inventory. In addition, there are another 12 million acres of lower-class land and excellent organic soils. From the tundra of the far north to the vineyards of Niagara, our topography has a bit of just about everything except desert.

Southern Ontario has not only the soils but also the climate to produce more than 100 crops — a much wider variety than other parts of Canada. In the choicest areas, our farm output is prodigious. Kent County alone has much higher agricultural sales than any of the Atlantic Provinces. The value of a single Ontario crop, corn, is nearly equivalent to the total value of farm production in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island combined.

Sitting in downtown Toronto, it's not easy to realize that this is such a great agricultural province. More than one-third of Canada's people live in Ontario. It's a great industrial province, accounting for more than half of all Canadian manufacturing. It's a great business complex, accounting for more than 44 per cent of Canada's financial, insurance and real estate activity. When it comes to farming, most people would think first of the vast western grain fields. But the truth is that urbanized, industrialized Ontario is also Canada's leading agricultural province. Our farmers earn about 27 per cent of the nation's total farm cash receipts.

This fact is all the more remarkable when you consider that only one person in 20 is a farmer. The face of rural Ontario has changed rapidly, and it's still changing. The trend has been to fewer farmers but bigger farms — and much more efficient farms.

Twenty years ago one Ontario farm produced enough to feed 12 people. Today one farm produces enough for 50 people.

Ontario's agricultural production has doubled since World War II, even with fewer farmers. It has expanded at about the same rate as population growth. We retain the capacity to continue this rate of increase in production for the rest of this century. We can even increase total farm production at a faster clip, if market conditions warrant.

Canada is a net exporter of food, primarily because of our western grain shipments. In Ontario we import a bit more food than we export. Nevertheless, we could be totally self-sufficient in food if we had to be or wanted to be. We could seal off our borders and maintain nutritious diets even in winter without the citrus fruits and other fresh produce we import from the south. Mind you, I can't imagine that we'd want to do anything of the sort. We're used to oranges, and besides, a lot of people count on our agricultural exports. Canada is the largest donor to the United Nations world food program. On a per capita basis, we're the biggest food donors in the world.

The extent of Ontario's food production isn't just a result of bigness. It's also the result of efficiency or productivity — the amount we accomplish from the various inputs used. Agriculture is the most efficient sector in our economy. Ontario's annual gains in farm productivity are significantly higher than the national average.

Twenty years ago one acre of land produced 33 bushels of winter wheat. Today, thanks to advances in scientific farming, one acre produces 48 bushels — an efficiency increase of 45 per cent in 20 years. Ten years ago the average Ontario dairy cow produced dairy products for fewer than nine people. Today it produces enough dairy products for 13 people — an increase of 50 per cent. In only five years, the average dairyman has increased his milk shipments by 35 per cent.

Those are pretty remarkable statistics, but here's one that's even more remarkable: 80 per cent of our food is produced by 20 per cent of our farmers. A great many factors underlie that

imbalance, but it's obvious that there's still room for even greater efficiency on our farms.

There's a problem associated with efficiency in agriculture, though. Instead of bringing the farmer rewards, it can sometimes bring penalties. The plain truth is that our farmers could produce more than the rest of us could eat — but they'd go broke doing it. Over-production cuts farm gate prices and creates surplus problems of the kind that our dairymen and grape growers suffered last year. Now our corn producers are worried about a near-surplus situation on the North American market.

The value of Ontario's corn is equivalent to the value of Manitoba's wheat. It is the basis for our livestock industry, which accounts for 70 per cent of Ontario's gross farm receipts. In the last 16 years our corn acreage has increased by 400 per cent and our corn production by 500 per cent. Ontario farmers now plant 1.5 million acres of corn, and I wouldn't be surprised to see that expand to 2 million acres in a few years. However, that will depend on market conditions, and right now the market's not so hot. In 1974 Ontario farmers produced 90 million bushels and got \$3.03 a bushel. Last year they produced 134 million bushels, but the estimated farm price is only \$2.20 a bushel.

That's one hell of a drop in income in a business where inflation has doubled the cost of production in the last five years. And it illustrates a point that doesn't receive nearly enough attention in most debates about preserving food lands: **Acreage figures can never be divorced from the dollars-and-cents realities of farm life in appraising the food situation today or planning for tomorrow.**

It is significant, I think, that the theme of this conference is "Food For the Cities." City people today are more concerned than they have ever been about how food reaches their tables. I believe this concern can be traced back to price increases in 1973, when urbanites began talking about a "food crisis." The other phrase on the cover of your program became current about the same time — "disappearing farmland and provincial land policy."

As a farmer, I can't help reflecting that city people showed little concern a few years earlier, when they were getting food at cut-rate prices that were driving many farmers off their land to find other work.

Between 1951 and 1971, total production and productivity per acre increased greatly on Ontario farms, but the market demand wasn't very strong. That combination drove prices down. When prices go too low, farmers go out of business. Then a scarcity of food can result. Everybody loses — producer and consumer alike. But no urban protests were heard in the 1960s about the sale or abandonment of land. When food for the cities was cheap only the farmers protested — and many of them had to take other jobs to keep food on their **own** tables.

What happened to the land they had to abandon? Well, some of it was used for housing and industrial sites. Some of it was sold to land speculators or city people who simply wanted to raise families away from the urban hassles. A lot of land was left to rest in pasture or woodlot until it became profitable to farm it again. In the 1970s farm gate prices have improved and many thousands of those idle acres have come back into food production. Many more thousands of acres could be reclaimed for agriculture if the need arose.

We have seen how farmers responded to favorable conditions for corn production. We'll see similar expansion in other areas of production when the market calls for expansion.

The concurrent upsurge of concern about planning for the future has been a mixed blessing. Some people who are relatively uninformed about agriculture have been misled by the manipulation of census figures from the 1960s. Some have been scared into accepting simplistic solutions to extremely complex issues. But there have been positive benefits, such as the public participation in selecting routes for power transmission corridors and other planning processes. There has been a great deal of worthwhile fact-finding and knowledgeable debate as well as political posturing.

The widespread public interest is a healthy sign, for in the long run society as a whole must solve many of the problems in land use and food production. City people, in particular, should not underestimate the complexity of the issues. The solutions will require well-informed public opinion, and the organizers of this conference are to be commended for trying to present various approaches as fairly and dispassionately as possible.

One of your aims is to assess the need for new provincial land use policies. I can assure you that the Government of Ontario is receptive to sound and practical new initiatives. We welcome them. We don't pretend we already have all the answers. That sort of rigidity would be a fatal approach to the future of our province.

Ontario's population today is around 8.2 million. By the end of the century we might have as many as 12 million people. They'll need more land for housing and services and work and recreation. They'll also need land to grow much more food than is grown now. The conflicting demands for every parcel of good land will be even more intense than they are today.

Such conflicts might assume crisis proportions in a small nation, but not in a province as big as ours. A valuable perspective on our situation was offered recently by a firm of consultants who studied Ontario's housing needs for the next quarter-century. This is what Peter Barnard Associates had to say:

"Land acreage requirements for the forecast level of housing are small in comparison to total land available. Approximately 278,000 acres are required to provide sufficient land for the total additional housing requirements to (the year) 2001. This acreage represents only .0012 per cent of the province's land supply, or an area equal to 1.8 times the land area of Metropolitan Toronto."

The report foresees some conflicts with prime agricultural uses in central Ontario, naturally. We all do. But with sensible

planning there's no reason we can't have farming on the prime land and housing on less valuable land.

From the available evidence, from the examples I've already cited of our agricultural capabilities, there is no cause for alarm about future food shortages. Certainly there would appear to be no excuse for any. However, that is no basis for complacency about our reserves of food-growing land.

Successive provincial governments have been planning for the wise use of our resources, including land, for 30 years or more. With the wisdom of hindsight, maybe we can say today that they should have shown more concern for farm land long ago. But then, how many of us did? Expansion was our watchword in the postwar years. Everything was geared to growth. Big was good and bigger was better.

In the 1970s, though, the emphasis is on **controlled** growth. Not zero growth, but moderate, reasonable and well-managed growth. We have seen provincial initiatives of a new type, such as the Toronto-Centred Region concept, the Parkway Belt System, the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the establishment of regional municipalities for co-ordinated planning in areas where urban development pressures were most pronounced.

We have seen an overall strengthening of the provincial-municipal planning process. The government believes detailed land use planning is done best at the local level, but it expects municipalities to recognize provincial responsibility for guiding the broad outlines of Ontario's development.

We want all official plans to conform to provincial policies, so close liaison is essential. We believe in co-operation, not confrontation. There have been occasional differences and disagreements, and no doubt there will be more in future. But on the whole this system is running as smoothly as anyone could ask.

The provincial and federal governments are also working in close co-operation under the Agricultural and Rural Develop-

ment Agreement. One of the most important ARDA programs helps farmers enlarge their holdings into more economically viable units. ARDA has acquired well over 400,000 acres which are leased to adjacent farmers for five years, at which time they may either buy the land or renew the lease. Another joint program has provided nine community pastures totalling more than 25,000 acres in various parts of Ontario.

In 1974 a provincial government committee grew into the Food Land Development Branch of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Its objective is to retain the better land in every part of the province for food production. The branch reviews all official plans, subdivision plans, and sometimes zoning bylaws and severance applications. It makes sure agricultural interests are adequately protected within a sound planning framework. Branch personnel work with planners, developers and politicians involved in the plans. They also maintain liaison with the Ministry of Housing and review proposals of other ministries, agencies and private firms that could affect valuable farmland.

Last year the government published "A Strategy For Ontario Farm Land." It renewed its commitment to maintain a permanent, secure, economically sturdy agriculture and food industry through two avenues. One consists of measures to ensure that within any area the better land is kept for farming. The other comprises a wide variety of programs to ensure the economic feasibility of using that better land for food production.

My parliamentary assistant, Bob Eaton, discussed the latter approach at a workshop session this morning. For those who were attending other workshops, I'd like to repeat that the Ministry of Agriculture and Food had a budget of \$171 million in the fiscal year just ending, in spite of the severe anti-inflationary restraints on government spending. All our programs help make agriculture a better business proposition.

For example, proper field drainage can increase crop production more than any single method we know. The amount

of drainage work in the province has increased tremendously in the '70s. In three years we have made more than \$45 million available to municipalities for low-interest tile drainage loans to farmers, and we plan to provide \$18 million in 1977-78. We also provide grants covering one-third of the cost of municipal drainage outlets that serve the farm drainage systems.

I won't list all our other programs to help the farmer help himself, but please don't forget that this year we have a provincial Farm Income Stabilization Plan to help participating producers weather periods of poor market conditions. That should boost confidence in the future of farming in Ontario.

I'm glad this conference on food land policies has drawn attention to the need for measures that ensure the economic viability of farm operations. I think it's impossible to overstate the importance of such measures in keeping farm land in production. They should never be sidelined in discussing the other side of the coin in government strategy — the actual conservation of land through planning.

One of the difficulties in planning has been the absence of reliable statistics on just how much land is being farmed in Ontario, and how much more **could be** farmed if there were money to be made farming it. We've had plenty of statistics floating around, but the trouble was that anyone could take his pick to prove almost any point he wanted to make.

I'm happy to say we'll soon have data which, I believe, everyone will accept as an accurate, current and comprehensive basis for planning and discussion. Information was obtained from a computer data bank developed by the Ministry of Revenue for assessing farm property. It identifies both properties that are being farmed and vacant land that can be regarded as potential farmland in reserve. We now have statistics for every county and region in Ontario, and I'll be tabling the results of this study in the Legislature in the very near future. Probably the most important aspect of this project is the fact that the computers will constantly be updating the figures, so we'll have a

benchmark for routine monitoring of land use changes in the future.

Another important advance was announced six weeks ago when the government issued what is known as its Green Paper on Planning For Agriculture: Food Land Guidelines to help municipal councils and planners identify and preserve our better food land.

The booklets are being distributed to municipalities, farm organizations and others for their comments before the guidelines become official government policy about five months from now.

Within five years, the government wants the final guidelines incorporated in all local, county and regional official plans. The laws of supply and demand determine how much land is actually in production at any time, but the guidelines aim at making sure that as much land as possible with the **capability** for food production is kept available for farming when it's needed.

In designating such lands, the guidelines establish priorities based on soil grades as they are ranked in the Canada Land Inventory. But they also give high priority to areas with a high capability for specialty crops, such as the Niagara fruit orchards, or apple areas, or greenhouse areas.

What's more, they draw attention to other areas where special conditions exist to make agriculture a viable enterprise. For example, some farmers using special management skills or farming techniques may succeed where others would fail. We also want to protect areas where farms survive mainly because they're close to major markets, such as the Greater Toronto complex. And there are special cases in northern Ontario as well, where local farms are the main source of fresh vegetables and dairy products.

I think the guidelines are extremely realistic and practical. They recognize that Ontario's urban growth must continue. So they make allowances for it, while providing measures to divert

development to land of poorer quality and minimize its impact on agriculture.

As a result, official plans will designate some high-priority food lands where only farming — or uses compatible with farming — will be permitted. A broader range of alternate uses may be allowed on land with a lower agricultural priority, but only as spelled out in the official plans.

We also hope local bylaws will incorporate the provincial Agricultural Code of Practice. It was revised last year and now provides formulas to keep rural residences and the smellier sort of farm operations a reasonable distance apart. This is especially useful in areas that fall within the so-called urban shadow, where farmers and non-farmers have to get along as neighbors. The Code was drafted in consultation with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and has since been approved by the Ontario Municipal Board.

In future, before any lands designated for agriculture may be used for other purposes, the need **must** be justified and documented. In addition, the amount of land allocated for various uses must be realistically related to population projections and compatible with provincial growth objectives for the general area.

The Government of Ontario also wants greater emphasis placed on planning for hamlets and villages to decide which ones should be encouraged to grow, and how. One result will be to limit growth of hamlets surrounded by good agricultural land and encourage growth of those surrounded by less valuable land.

The government wants firm policies set to minimize the impact on agriculture caused by new highways, power lines, oil or gas pipelines, water and sewer lines, and waste disposal sites.

The guidelines specify ways to discourage severances for non-farming purposes and divert rural-residential development away from prime land.

They encourage buffer zones between urban and agricultural areas to avoid the problem of strip development next door to farming.

They require better planning for future changes in urban boundaries. This will include definite staging to indicate the direction and extent of future growth, the rate at which it will occur, and the time limits within which agriculture can occupy the area as an interim land use.

Long-range planning of that sort will reduce uncertainty and speculation in areas where growth will not be permitted.

Some critics have complained that the guidelines lack teeth unless they are codified in provincial legislation. Well, they're wrong. The guidelines are tough — in fact, they're **too** tough to suit some other critics. And they couldn't be legislated in a province this size because there are simply too many factors which, taken together, describe the character of a tract of land.

It's simple enough to determine whether it's Class 1 or 2, usually. And whether the slope, wetness and so on make it suitable for agriculture. But how could we write into legislation such considerations as the growth prospects for the town next to this piece of land? How would we account for the fact that it has a unique stand of, say, mature black walnut trees? Or that the ownership is fragmented?

Under the rigidity of legislation, how would we compare this piece of land to another property next to a town whose growth prospects are quite different? Or in an area where black walnut trees are not particularly rare?

For hundreds of reasons like those, both the municipalities and the province must be free to exercise individual discretion in judging individual cases.

The vital point is that the overriding concern of conserving agricultural land must be borne firmly in mind by the people applying those judgments. It will be the responsibility of people who want to withdraw land from agriculture to justify such a

withdrawal thoroughly. It will be the responsibility of the plans approval people to apply the final guidelines as consistently as possible, remembering that their discretionary powers must be applied wisely and sensitively.

Blanket legislation could invite complacency, whereas this system will ensure vigilance by plan approvers who judge each case on its merits. I simply can't understand how anyone could consider this procedure **less** flexible than province-wide legislation.

The system will require good faith on both sides. Sometimes it won't work properly. But its chances of success are infinitely better than we could hope for if we simply issued decrees from on high and expected them to apply equally well to any situation that arose anywhere in the province.

Planning procedures **must** be flexible in a province as big and diversified as ours. We have ruled out such inflexible proposals as the provincial land freeze advocated by the New Democratic Party and others. Not only would it be unnecessary and unfair to thousands of farmers, it would be an administrative and legal nightmare. Besides, it probably wouldn't work.

There is no need for that sort of authoritarian action when food land can be protected through provincial-municipal co-operation. The food land guidelines will do that. We have already demonstrated their value in the case of the official plan for the Region of Niagara.

The province sent the plan back twice for revisions because we felt the proposed urban boundaries were eating up far too much of Niagara's unique fruit lands. The region is blessed with well over 300,000 acres of fine farmland. We had to establish priorities.

We gave top priority to the unique fruit lands, located mainly in the narrow band between the Niagara Escarpment and the Lake Ontario shoreline. For the most part, the lands south of the escarpment are more suited to general farming enterprises.

The fruit lands themselves may be divided into two categories: those suitable for tender fruits such as peaches or plums and those suitable for grapes. A combination of circumstances give the tender fruit soils the higher priority of the two. General agricultural land comes third. We were also concerned with retaining large tracts of land wherever possible, as the guidelines recommend.

The result was that the government decided that 3,000 acres could be saved from urban expansion — 1,800 acres of tender fruit land and 1,200 acres of vineyards. Some other parcels could have been saved, but there were already problems of land fragmentation and conflicts between fruit production and adjacent development. So we decided these should be used for urban housing. The guidelines stress that population projections must be realistic and compatible with provincial growth objectives for the area. The Region of Niagara reduced its original population projections to meet this criterion.

The province also insisted on documentation and justification for alternate land use proposals.

The regional policy now conforms to the food land guidelines by re-directing urban development south of the escarpment as a positive aid in reducing urban pressures on the unique agricultural lands to the north. The government will provide financial assistance. The Niagara municipalities will also make sure all vacant properties within their existing limits are built up before they consider expanding outwards.

Politics is the art of the practical. Niagara Regional Council has accepted our solution, and I think it was an eminently practical one. About 3,000 acres of fine land will be permanently available for agricultural use — as they would not have been without the provincial review. We have established long-term, stable urban limits in the area. Outside those limits there are about 400,000 acres, and we have also established agricultural priorities for more than three-quarters of all that land.

I'd like to stress that we didn't arrive at the solution just by

drawing lines on maps. The land use decision was made in conjunction with economic policies to assist the Niagara fruit farmers. My ministry is developing new research and economic programs to maintain the tender fruit industry. We are providing grape growers with assistance to convert to the French hybrid vines preferred for table wine production. The government has introduced legislation to reduce the price of 200 domestic wines and encourage their consumption. For two years we have also guaranteed loans to purchase surplus grapes and produce Ontario brandy. We also plan market development projects and efforts to improve tariff arrangements.

All these things are the nuts and bolts of land use planning — the results of an integrated government strategy to tackle difficult decisions from every angle. After all, there's no point in designating land for agriculture unless a man can make a buck farming it.

When we talk of preserving agricultural land, let's not talk as though we were preserving some sort of museum. Farming is a business. Like any business, it has to generate customers. Agriculture has experienced problems in marketing several commodities, and it will face new problems in the future.

I am convinced that government must increase its share of responsibility in farm marketing. We must look at measures that would assure our producers, as far as is possible, that everyone involved in marketing food understands what is happening in the market place. For this reason, my ministry plans to establish a strong, talented and co-ordinated market outlook branch to analyze developments and spread the word about them.

We reorganized the ministry last year to form a new Marketing Division that concentrates on selling Ontario food products and opening new markets for them. Ontario's food exports exceeded \$650 million last year, but we think we can do better. I recently returned from a trade mission to Britain with members of several farm marketing boards. Other missions are planned this year to Europe, the Far East, the Caribbean . . . even to darkest Buffalo.

We encourage foreign buyers to visit Ontario and see the food products we can offer. We organize trade show exhibits in other countries. We provide grants towards approved industry projects for promotion outside the province.

At the same time we are trying to replace food products that are now being imported but could be produced in Ontario. We identify markets and then encourage their development by co-ordinating the approaches of producers, researchers and extension personnel. We co-ordinate sales promotions for the gigantic hotel, restaurant and institutional trade. And much more besides. This year you'll notice an even stronger promotion of Ontario food products.

When you take such pains to sell Ontario food products, it's disheartening to see shoppers reach for an imported product instead because it's a bit cheaper. It's happening all the time, all around us, and it's undermining our agriculture and food industry.

Some countries can produce food more cheaply than we can. Their climate is warmer, their growing season is longer, their labor costs are lower, their whole standard of living is lower than ours. A primary reason for our higher standard of living is that we've always enjoyed low food prices, in relation to our earning power, so we've had more money to spend on other things. We are not going to lower our living standards, obviously, so our farmers have every right to expect support in their fight against cut-rate foreign competition. Instead, the federal trade and tariff policies often create enormous difficulties for our own producers and processors while encouraging those in other countries.

The Niagara Fruit and Vegetable Growers asked Ottawa for some action. Instead, their Association got a letter last month from the Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, Tony Abbott. It read, in part:

"One of our best measures of competitiveness is in relation to imports. I can accept the case for temporary

protection against low-priced imports coming into Canada because of particular short-run situations of market gluts or overproduction in other countries. On the other hand, I am not convinced that protection is warranted in those instances where other countries can supply the Canadian market on a regular basis at lower prices than our own industry. If this causes problems for the Canadian industry, then I believe the solution is to assist the industry to adjust to the new environment."

New environment, eh? Maybe it's a new environment for Mr. Abbott, but it sure isn't new for the Niagara grower. How would you react to that kind of preaching if you were a peach farmer who had watched Ontario's share of its own peach market whittled down from 80 per cent to less than 20 per cent? How would you feel, knowing that Australian peaches pour into Canada at a tariff of half a penny per pound, and Australian pears enter Canada duty-free? How would you feel if you were still waiting for the Tariff Review Board to say something about the reforms you requested in 1973?

I'll tell you how I reacted. I got sore as a boil. Here we are, wrestling with the problems of preserving the Niagara orchards, and there is the federal government, denying Niagara growers the national support they could expect in almost any other country.

That kind of callous, short-sighted thinking in Ottawa has already killed Ontario's sugar beet industry. Now it's threatening other areas of agriculture. Whether the federal attitude results from indifference or opportunism, it has to change. And this is the time to change it.

During a recent foreign trade mission I visited Geneva, the site of the so-called Tokyo Round of talks on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, or GATT. I was appalled to learn how little direction Canada's negotiators have been receiving from Ottawa. It could be 10 years before we get another chance like this to improve our agricultural trading position.

Subsequently I went to Ottawa with a delegation representing the main sectors of Ontario's agriculture industry. We delivered a list of priorities that we want presented at the GATT negotiations or outside them. Here are some of our key demands:

- We want no variable levies against our food unless Canada also imposes them.
- We want reciprocity in tariffs, quotas and non-tariff measures between Canada and the United States.
- We want all Canadian tariffs calculated as a percentage of a commodity's value, as other countries calculate them, instead of our obsolete cents-per-pound duties that have been eaten away by inflation.
- We want Canada's anti-dumping procedures streamlined so they can go into action in time to protect our domestic agricultural industries from the periodic waves of low-priced foreign surpluses.
- We want seasonal protection for fresh Ontario produce.
- We want a meat import law that will give Canadian producers the same kind of protection American producers enjoy.

In short, we want equity and fair play.

Since our visit to Ottawa, higher tariffs have been announced on imported pork and canned tomatoes from Taiwan. These are steps in the right direction. But a great deal remains to be done. Many of our tariff troubles aren't just inequities — they're absurdities. It's time for some desk-thumping in Ottawa, and the Ontario government is doing just that.

Canada, like the other GATT nations, is permitted to restrict the competition against foods that are regulated on a national scale. We have national production quotas only for milk, eggs and turkeys. They aren't desirable in the case of some other commodities. But where it is appropriate, the Government of Ontario supports the national plan approach as one answer to the problem of maintaining our own markets.

Another answer is salesmanship. We already have 16 promotional campaigns planned for this year, and with so much pressure on our domestic market we will inject a new note of urgency in a familiar appeal to consumers: Buy Ontario.

If Ontario shoppers support Ontario farmers, they'll do as much to guarantee food for the cities as the planning decisions, the agricultural research, the whole gamut of extension services in rural Ontario. If society as a whole truly wants to guarantee our future food supply, then society as a whole must decide it's willing to pay our farmers a fair price and keep them on the land.

Farmers have certainly been getting better prices in the 1970s. But at the same time their production costs have doubled, and they're still going up. Federal economists expect this year's farm cash receipts to remain around the 1976 level while expenditures increase another six per cent. If the economists are right, Ontario farmers will end 1977 with 19 per cent less in their pockets than in 1975.

Inflation hurts everyone. Sure, but other people are still getting raises. Something is drastically wrong when our farmers — the most efficient producers in our economy — are penalized by pay cuts. If there is a threat to the supply of food for the cities, it lies mainly in the economic bind confronting our farmers.

The dilemma won't be solved by politicians and planners. This is a problem all the people of Ontario must face squarely. If there is a moral imperative to protect our food lands, there is also a moral imperative to pay our farmers a fair price.

We can't go on expecting cheap food forever, any more than we can expect a return to cheap electricity and cheap gasoline. If we're going to buy our food from other countries, we might just as well build on every available square foot of land in the Niagara Peninsula. That would leave us at the mercy of foreign suppliers five years or 10 years or 25 years from now.

If we sell out on our own farmers for short-term gains today, our selfishness will cost the people of Ontario an awful lot more in the long run.